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ABSTRACT

This report discusses outcomes of a study of assessment directors and transition specialists from each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia on exit documents available to and graduation requirements for students with and without disabilities. Results indicate: (1) approximately 80 percent of the states have alternative exit documents for students; (2) states have raised and are continuing to raise their high school graduation requirements; (3) some states allow flexibility for students with disabilities in meeting graduation requirements in multiple ways, including Individualized Education Program (IEP) completion, modified coursework, and exemption from an exit exam; (4) modified coursework to meet course credit requirements is the most common type of change provided to students with disabilities; (5) IEP completion is not a universally accepted way for students with disabilities to earn a standard diploma; (6) states with graduation exams generally had more exit documents available to students but less flexibility in how students with disabilities could meet standard diploma requirements; (7) almost all states that did not allow changes in standard diploma requirements for students with disabilities had at least two exit documents available to these students; and (8) most states with graduation exams had records of the participation and performance of their students with disabilities in those exams. (CR)

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National Transition Network

June 1999

State Graduation Requirements for Students With and Without Disabilities

Executive Summary

Overview

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EC 307268

State Graduation Requirements for Students With and Without Disabilities

Executive Summary

Overview

Graduation from school and the requirements for receiving a diploma have received increased attention since the enactment of Goals 2000, the School-to-Work Opportunities Act, Improving America's Schools Act (IASA), and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). At the same time, federal and state efforts to improve curriculum content, instructional practices, and student performance encourage closer alignment of general and special education reform efforts. The policies and procedures that states implement affect graduation decisions for both students with and without disabilities and, ultimately, their postschool outcomes. This executive summary is based on a longer report developed collaboratively by the National Transition Network (NTN) and the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO), both of which are addressing issues related to successful school and postschool outcomes for students with disabilities. The purpose of the report is to update and clarify the knowledge base about state high school graduation requirements for students with and without disabilities, and to create a data base from which to track changes in policy as reform strategies in general and special education are implemented. Four major issues are addressed in this summary:

1. Exit documents available to students with and without disabilities.
2. State graduation requirements.
3. Modified graduation requirements for students with disabilities.
4. Current and future status of graduation requirements.

Method

The basis for this study was a survey conducted by Thurlow, Ysseldyke, and Anderson (1995), which was used to guide methodological procedures and instrumentation. A comparison of the data from the current research effort and the former study also made it possible to examine changes in policy over time.

Two groups of state department personnel—assessment directors and transition specialists—from each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia were sent surveys on graduation requirements. State assessment directors completed one survey, which was designed to examine high school graduation requirements in general. Transition specialists, who were the directors of the state systems change projects on transition, directors of special education at the state departments of education, or their designees, completed a survey that inquired about high school graduation requirements specific to students with disabilities.

Results

The summary results presented here provide aggregate information on states. The longer report from which this summary was derived contains much more detailed data, including data for each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

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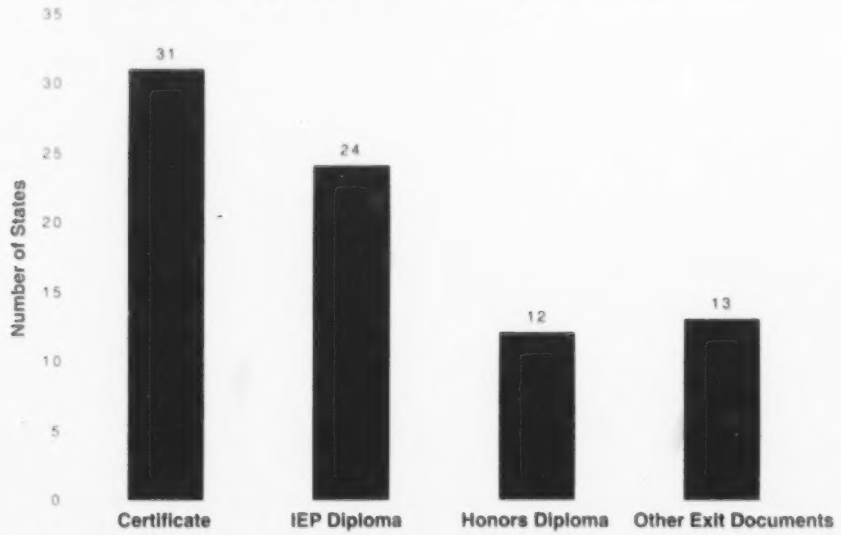
Exit Documents

- Although various names were used for exit documents in different states, students with and without disabilities earned standard high school diplomas upon completion of graduation requirements in 50 states (including the District of Columbia here). In one state, the transition specialist reported that local education agencies (LEAs) determine exit documents available to students with disabilities.
- States have a variety of exit documents available to students with and without disabilities *(see Figure 1)*. The certificate is available to students with and without disabilities, whereas the Individualized

Figure 1. Exit Documents Other Than Standard Diploma



Education Program (IEP) diploma is available only to students with disabilities. The certificate is generally awarded to students who have not completed requirements for a standard diploma or an IEP diploma. Often students who age-out of eligibility for services are awarded a certificate. The "other exit document" category includes adult diplomas and occupational diplomas, for example.

- States offer diverse arrays of exit documents. The most common array (available in 11 states) was a standard diploma combined with a certificate of attendance. In nine states, a standard diploma was the only option for exit from school. In seven states, a standard diploma, an IEP diploma, and a certificate were available.
- The information received from general and special education personnel was not always the same, even when a question called for the same information. For example, transition specialists indicated that honors diplomas were available to students with disabilities in only three of the twelve states in which assessment directors indicated they were available to all students.

General Nature of State Graduation Requirements

- State requirements for a high school diploma were of three types: (1) earn a certain number of course credits, (2) pass some form of a graduation exam, and (3) meet both course credits and graduation exam requirements. These are shown in *Figure 2* (next page).

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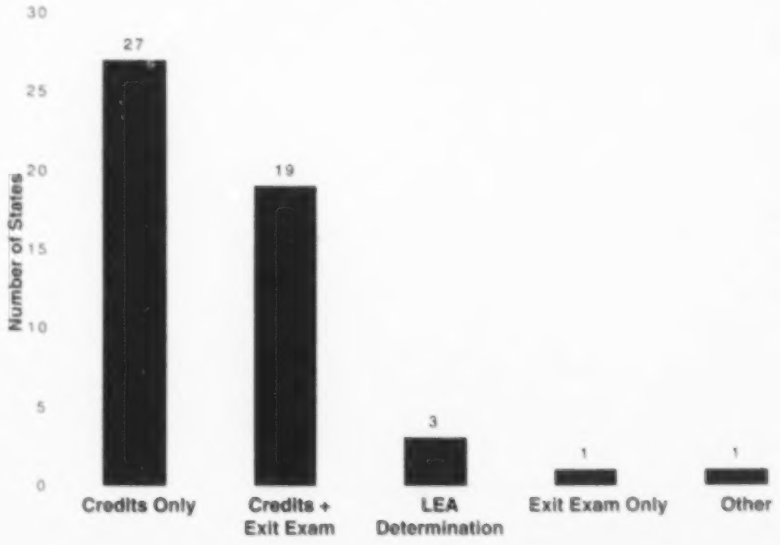
• One state in the "other" category had credit requirements for high school graduation, but let LEAs decide whether they would use some form of exit exam as a graduation requirement.

Figure 2. Standard Diploma Requirements



Course Credit Requirements

• Forty-one states required completion of Carnegie course units for a standard diploma.

• The actual number of credits required for graduation varied widely from state to state, ranging from 14.5 credits to 24 credits, distributed primarily among English, Math, Science, Social Studies, Health or Physical Education, Arts, and Electives.

• The other 10 states had different credit unit systems, left the determination of credits to LEAs, or did not require course credits. In the five states that had different credit unit systems, course requirements were recorded as the number of years of coursework, the number of semester credits, or the number of course credits.

Graduation Exams

• In addition to course credits, 19 states required their students to pass some form of exit exam before they could earn a high school diploma. In addition, one other state did not have course credit requirements but had exam requirements.

• In nearly all states with an exit exam, English/Language Arts and Math were the core curricular areas included in the exam.

• In nearly all of the 20 states with an exit exam, students were allowed to have multiple opportunities to take and pass the exam.

• Sixteen states kept records of the participation of students with disabilities in the graduation exam, and, of the 16 states, 11 disaggregated participation data by disability category. Fourteen states kept

records of the performance of students with disabilities on the exam, and, of the 14 states, 10 disaggregated the performance data by disability category.

Changes in Graduation Requirements for Students with Disabilities

- Of the 27 states with course credit requirements, 20 allowed their students with disabilities to meet the requirements by taking modified coursework or completing IEPs, or by having IEP teams or LEAs decide the requirements.
- Of the 19 states with both credit and exam requirements for graduation, 12 allowed changes in requirements for students with disabilities to earn a standard diploma. Specifically, four states allowed modified coursework for students with disabilities but required them to take the same exit exam; two did not allow modified coursework but exempted students with disabilities from the exit exam; one allowed modified coursework and an alternative exam; one allowed IEP completion; and two let IEP teams or LEAs decide changes in requirements for students with disabilities to earn a standard diploma.
- In the 20 states with an exit exam, students with disabilities who passed the exit exam were eligible for a standard diploma. In four states, modifications to the exam requirements (changes in addition to accommodations on the exam) were available to students with disabilities. In three states, students with disabilities could be exempted from the exam but still receive a standard diploma. In one state, students with disabilities who were exempted from the exit exam were required to participate in an alternative assessment.
- The 20 states with an exit exam had different policies on how to assign passing scores to students with disabilities. In 12 states, all students with disabilities, regardless of the severity level of disabilities, were required to pass the same exam with the same score as those required for students without disabilities. In two states, only the students with mild disabilities were required to take the same exit exam and pass it with the same score as students without disabilities. In one state, the exit exam requirement was applied only to students with mild or moderate disabilities.

Status of Graduation Policies

Policy changes that have occurred since 1995 include:

- Changes in the number of states with credit requirements have been minimal. Changes are most evident in the number of credits required to earn a diploma. About one fourth of the states with total credit requirements have increased the number of credits required for a standard diploma. Of these states, six increased credits in core academics such as math and science, and other states broadened the content of courses by establishing credit requirements in other courses such as physical education and health.
- The number of states that have an exit exam linked to graduation requirements increased from 17 to 20. In one state, an exit exam is now being used to earn state endorsements on local diplomas. Four states have added exit exams since 1995.
- Approximately one third of the states either changed the number of options available to students with disabilities, with more options now available, or changed the standard diploma requirements.

Future changes in policy include:

- Policies regarding exit documents will continue to change, especially for students with disabilities. Twenty-three states indicated revision plans for students with disabilities.
- Most of the 20 states with exit exams are currently revising or considering revising their policies on

graduation exams. Ten additional states are currently developing or considering developing graduation exams.

- Sixteen states are currently revising or considering revising their graduation requirements for students without disabilities and 14 indicated revision plans for students with disabilities. Thirteen states have developed new graduation requirements for students with or without disabilities.

Conclusion

This study reveals the complexity of graduation requirement policies across the 50 states and the District of Columbia. For students with disabilities, the complexity is multiplied because of the existence of exit documents not available to students without disabilities, modified requirements for a standard diploma, exemption from requirements that students without disabilities must meet to receive the same exit document, and the introduction of LEA or IEP team discretion. Despite the complexity, it is possible to draw some general conclusions about graduation requirements for students with and without disabilities. These conclusions have important implications for students' educational outcomes, particularly students with disabilities.

- Approximately 80% of the states have alternative exit documents for students. The number of states with alternative exit documents has grown.
- States have raised and are continuing to raise their high school graduation requirements.
- Some states allow flexibility for students with disabilities in meeting graduation requirements in multiple ways, including IEP completion, modified coursework, exemption from an exit exam, and local-level decisions about applicability of requirements to individual students.
- Modified coursework to meet course credit requirements is the most common type of change provided to students with disabilities.
- IEP completion is not a universally accepted way for students with disabilities to earn a standard diploma.
- States with graduation exams generally had more exit documents available to students but less flexibility in how students with disabilities could meet standard diploma requirements.
- Almost all states that did not allow changes in standard diploma requirements for students with disabilities had at least two exit documents available to these students.
- Most of the states with graduation exams had records of the participation and performance of their students with disabilities in those exams; however, only one half of the states with graduation exams disaggregated their data by disability category (not a federal requirement).

Findings from this study reveal the need for general and special education programs to collaborate so all students, including students with special needs, can be integrated into states' educational accountability systems. Changes in graduation requirements are pushing the educational system to figure out a better way to do that. At this time, however, not enough is known about the consequences of these changes. Further policy development and refinement should be based on the intended and unintended consequences of current policies and projected changes.

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